

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Our Prophetic Inheritance”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 2, 2011

READINGS

Isaiah 1:2-4, 21-28

Listen, you heavens; earth, attend for the holy one speaks,
“I reared sons, I brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib,
Israel knows nothing, my people understands nothing.”

A sinful nation, a people weighed down with guilt,
a breed of wrong doers, perverted sons.
They have abandoned God, despised the Holy One of Israel,
they have turned away...

What a harlot she has become, the faithful city, Zion, that was all justice!
Once integrity lived there, but now assassins.

Your silver has turned to dross, your wine is watered.
Your princes are rebels, accomplices of thieves.

All are greedy for profit and chase after bribes.
They show no justice to the orphan, the cause of the widow is never heard.

Therefore -it is the Lord who speaks, the Mighty One of Israel,
“Ah, I will outdo my enemies, avenge myself on my foes.

“I will turn my hand against you, I will smelt away your dross in the furnace,
I will remove all your base metal from you.

“I will restore your judges as of old, your counselors as in bygone days.
Then you will be called City of Integrity, Faithful City.”

Zion will be redeemed by justice, and her penitents by integrity.
Rebels and sinners together will be shattered, and those who abandon holiness will perish.

Micah 4:1-4

In the days to come the mountains of the temple of God
 will be put on top of the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills.
 The peoples will stream to it, nations without number will come to it; and they will say,
 "Come, let us go up to the holy mountain, to the Temple of the God of Jacob
 so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths;
 since from Zion the Law will go out, and the holy oracle from Jerusalem,
 God will wield authority over many peoples and arbitrate for mighty nations;
 They will hammer their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks.
 Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war,
 Everyone will sit under vines and fig trees with no source of trouble.
 The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

Micah 6:2-4, 6-8

Listen, you mountains, to God's accusation, give ear, you foundations of the earth,
 for God is accusing ... and pleading against Israel:
 My people, what have I done to you how have I been a burden to you? Answer me.
 I brought you out of the land of Egypt, I rescued you from the house of slavery;
 I sent Moses to lead you, with Arron and Miriam...

"With what gift shall I come into God's presence and bow down before God on high?
 Shall I come with sacrifices with calves one year old?
 Will God be pleased with rams by the thousand, with libations of oil in torrents?
 Must I give my first-born for what I have done wrong, the fruit of my body for my own sin?

What is good has been explained to you, this is what God asks of you:
 only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.

Sermon

Like many Unitarian Universalist congregations, we speak prophetically in the public square. In the 1920's we helped form the Albany Inter-Racial Council to address inequalities. In the 1960's, under the leadership of the Rev. Nick Cardell, we fought the Albany political machine's five dollar payoff to get Democrats to the polls to vote. Through the Committee on Progressive Legislation, we were instrumental in women's reproductive rights legislation in the early 1970's. We've been in front lines supporting every LGBTQ issue, starting in the 70's, most recently marriage equality. We declared our congregation a Nuclear Free Zone to oppose nuclear weapons in the 1980's. We also became a Sanctuary congregation to assist

refugees from death squads in Central America on their journey to Canada. More recently, our congregation was instrumental in the successes ARISE had in congregation based community organizing.

Jumping to the present time, Monday, tomorrow, I'll be talking about our Social Responsibility Council's Hydraulic Fracturing Statement at a press conference and demonstration in front of the Albany City Hall - be there or be square in your yellow, Standing on the Side of Love T-Shirt. I'm very proud of the passion and commitment in our congregation making advocating for justice a central part of our congregational identity. I hope you are too.

Our weakness, however, is our grounding for this work. Watching the movie, Gasland, certainly engaged my emotions against gas drilling. But having my temper flare just isn't enough for effective social action. I needed to go deeper to understand *why* the gas companies practices are wrong. I needed to go deeper *to recognize* how to respond from my religious values and beliefs.

One way we Unitarian Universalists go deeper to explore our values and beliefs is to go to our sources. Unitarian Universalists name six sources in our purposes and principles statement, you'll find them in the front of your hymnal, including direct experience, wisdom of the worlds religions, humanist teachings, earth centered traditions and Jewish and Christian teachings. One of those sources specifically names "prophets:" Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. UU theologian, James Luther Adams called our faith, "The prophethood of all believers." We love that word prophet ... but, do we *really* know much about the first ones?

If you don't, you're in luck! Prophets old and new will be the focus of four sermons in October. Tuesday night, I'll start a four session class on them at 7:00pm. Today I start with the Biblical ones.

Altogether, 48 men and 7 women have been designated Biblical prophets. One of the first ones, the one most of us are at least a little familiar with, is Moses. Moses defines the prophetic model. Have you heard his story?

Moses is out tending his flocks, minding his own business, when he sees a bush that appears to be on fire, without burning up. It calls his name, "Moses, Moses." Moses responds, "Here am I." As he approaches, the bush cautions, "Do not come near, put off your shoes from your feet, for the place you are standing is holy ground." So begins the commissioning of Moses to set the Jewish people free from Pharaoh and their slavery in Egypt.

What is important to note here is Moses doesn't think this up himself. In fact, Moses is anything but enthusiastic about getting the divine call to liberate his people. Moses says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Moses doesn't think anyone will believe him or follow him. Moses complains that he stutters and isn't a good public speaker. After quite a lot of coaxing, confidence building and promises of heavenly backing from God, Moses agrees to take up the challenge.

As is familiar to any of us who has attended a Passover Seder, Moses is successful in liberating his people from Egypt. While wandering those 40 years in the desert, before they arrive in the promise land, God makes some really big promises to Moses. If the Jewish people keep God's laws and commandments, then, they will be favored and be blessed. From Mount Sinai, God offers Moses and the Jews a covenant, a promise that becomes foundational for their faith. The Jews become a people of the Law. Now, more than acts of worship and sacrifice, loving God means keeping God's law. If not, there will be trouble, as God anger transforms into lightening bolts and earthquakes, plagues and invasions, fires and floods.

From then on, during the time of early settlement of Palestine guided by the Judges, to the establishment of the first Jewish King, to the division of Israel from Judah, to the conquest by the Assyrians, to the Babylonian captivity, to the conquest by the Greeks, Hebrew prophets have appeared to critique the state of affairs and call the Jewish people back into right relationship with God.

These prophets weren't leaders like Moses. They were not among the politically powerful - some, as lowly as shepherds. Some as reportedly supernaturally gifted as Elijah. What they had in common was being specially selected *to be* God's voice on earth and deliver God's message, often quite dramatically. The prophet Isaiah walked barefoot and half-naked for three years to warn his people. Jeremiah took a clay jar and smashed it in front of the elders and priests to illustrate that God will destroy Judah. He also put a yoke made of wood and leather straps around his own neck, to demonstrate the coming Babylonian captivity.

Prophets tend to show up at inconvenient times with an inconvenient truth. Amos, calls out, "Hear this, you who trample upon the needy...and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals..." Isaiah warns, "Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones..." Habakkuk laments, "Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own ... Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house,... Woe to him who builds a town with blood..." The prophets go straight to the top and name the evils they see.

Impatiently they warn of the consequences of turning away from their covenant with God.

A few at the top may be responsible for injustice, but the whole people will suffer for their sins. "I shall send a fire upon Judah," says God through Amos' lips, "and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem." "God personally will hack down their altars," warns Hosea, "and wreck their sacred pillars." Micah announces for God, "Listen, for this whole brood I am planning disaster, whose yoke you cannot shake from your necks, and walk upright; it shall be your hour of disaster."

But the prophets are not all doom and gloom. They also foresee a time of purification and redemption when the people *turn away* from evil, and the covenant restored. The selections I read from Micah are beautiful visions of what that restoration will look like:

God will wield authority over many peoples and arbitrate for mighty nations;
 They will hammer their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks.
 Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training for war,
 Everyone will sit under vines and fig trees with no source of trouble.

Sadly, that vision of beating swords into plowshares, written thousands of years ago, seems as far away now as it was then. The war making seems more furious than ever.

This is the agony of the prophets: Their deep sensitivity to evil will not let them rest. They courageously name the evil they see to the mighty *and* the comfortable. Often, they suffer rejection as they foretell the consequences that will come from injustice, from neglecting the covenant with God. They long for recognition and repentance so the restoration they imagine will take place.

So how are you feeling about these tormented, visionary prophets who command our attention? Their wrath jumps off the page ready to confront evil. Armed with the divine word in their mouth, they speak out for justice and compassion for the disadvantaged and the poor. These prophets bow before no one but the God who sent them.

I introduce you to, or remind you of these prophets because they are our spiritual ancestors. Our Calvinist forebears, some of whom evolved into Unitarians and Universalists, though their vision was deeply flawed, brought the prophetic dream of a new Jerusalem to this land. Though we rejected Calvinist theology, the Puritan passion to fashion a just society can still inspire us.

The Biblical prophets have much to teach us about being a prophet ... today. To learn those lessons, we have to get past the traditional theistic language. We have to understand the times and the culture in which they lived. We have to pay attention to the intentions behind the language they use.

We can't take these prophets literally. Scholars doubt the voracity of the Exodus from Egypt Moses led. Little of the settlement of Palestine probably happened the way it was recorded in the Book of Joshua and Judges. Yet imbedded in these stories are metaphorical nuggets of truth about the human condition that have resonance with what really did happen.

I read the prophets the way I read ... poetry. I'm not looking for rational arguments or historical accuracy from them. I pay attention to the images, the metaphors, the feeling and the passion. Their outrage shakes my complacency. Their predictions of wrath and destruction quicken my attention to the future dangers we face today. And their vision of restoration and renewal penetrate my distress facing today's challenges confronting the civilized world. Being conquered by the Assyrians was no picnic. Babylonian captivity for seventy years must have been miserable. The prophets foresaw and lived through suffering many of us have never known.

And yet, they believed that God would not abandon them. No matter how alienated, God would not abandon the covenant. For all their fury, the prophets also stood on the bedrock of God's love.

Theist or atheist, we need to find the kind of faith and courage the prophets had to confront the mammoth problems before us. There aren't any easy answers to global climate change. The end of cheap energy will remake our world. Our assault on the planet's resources and species will not go unanswered. Massive relocation of populations will redefine cultures and identities.

In the Biblical prophets, we will find language that can bridge Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Humanist divisions. We share the *same* covenant-based vision of justice, equity, equality, and human rights the prophets proclaimed.

My hope is if we unite around these prophetic values, in our congregation and in the world, we have a chance to bring their prophetic visions to life. How will that happen?

What is good has been explained to you,
 this is what God asks of you:
 only this, to act justly,
 to love tenderly,
 and to walk humbly with your God.

Benediction

The Prophet Hosea concludes with these words:

Let the wise understand these words.

Let the intelligent grasp their meaning.

For the ways of God are straight, and the virtuous, walk in them,
but sinners stumble.

Whether we are sinners or saints, the way to virtue is direct.

Understanding the prophets is not enough.

Only walking in their ways will transform and heal the world.

Go and do likewise.